

Teeming Stomachs and Infinite Spirals:

Posthuman Anxiety in Patrick Ness's *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down*

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ABSTRACT

The posthuman – as ontology, theory, philosophy, ethical framework – has been somewhat valorised in the cultural and critical imagination of late: heralded as the aspirational antithesis of a longstanding, yet long-critiqued humanist infrastructure based on division and exclusion. In particular, critics of young adult fiction have – through extensive posthumanist readings of fantasy, dystopia, and speculative/science fiction genres – lauded the posthuman as a powerful (if often latent) force capable of disrupting tyrannous regimes, saving the planet and generally kicking serious existential ass. But what does the posthuman mean beyond these genres? Who is excluded from these spectacular narratives of empowerment? And to what effect? Through an examination of adolescent anxiety in John Green's *Turtles All The Way Down* (2017) and Patrick Ness's *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015), this article draws connections between the posthuman and mental health that expose the

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dangers of this new exceptionalism – even (or especially) when it operates under the guise of ‘butt-kicking’ empowerment and radical inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

There are few things more prosaic, more mundane about the human condition, than the inner workings of our gastric tracts. And yet it is here – amongst embarrassing gurgles and peristaltic tedium – that this discussion of the posthuman both begins and ends: with two young adult protagonists who are frightfully, obsessively concerned with their stomachs. Take sixteen-year-old Aza, for instance, in John Green’s *Turtles All The Way Down* (2017). The novel opens in a public-school cafeteria in Indianapolis, as Aza and her friends sit and eat their lunch together. Aza tries to keep up with the quick-witted conversation, but finds herself too distracted by the noisy machinations of her bacteria-infested bowels.

I am listening, I thought, to the cacophony of my digestive tract. Of course, I’d long known that I was playing host to a massive collection of parasitic organisms, but I didn’t much like being reminded of it. By cell count, humans are approximately 50 percent microbial, meaning that about half of the cells that make you up are not yours at all. There are something like a thousand times more microbes living in my particular biome than there are human beings on earth, and it often seems like I can feel them living and breeding and dying in and on me...Admittedly, I have some anxiety problems, but I would argue that it isn’t irrational to be concerned about the fact that that you are a skin-encased bacterial colony. (Green 3)

Similarly, Patrick Ness’s *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015) opens with seventeen-year-old Mike and his friends deep in discussion about the power of our stomachs – particularly the role that they may (or may not) play in love. Whilst Mike’s sister refuses to believe that our digestive systems determine anything about our romantic lives, Mike nervously listens to his best friend – for whom he harbours not-uncomplicated feelings – defend the idea:

“It is in your stomach...You feel it right here.” Jared puts his hand on his belly. It’s a biggish kind of belly and we know he doesn’t draw attention to it lightly. “And it’s like, for that moment, everything you believed is wrong. Or doesn’t matter. And everything that was complicated is suddenly, like, yes-and-no simple, because your stomach is really the boss.” (Ness 11)

This suggestion makes Mike incredibly apprehensive, and he begins fervently tapping the four corners of his textbook.

In both novels, the teen narrators are preoccupied with the banality of their most human bodily functions and yet – at the same time – daunted by the intricacies of, what we might call, the posthuman predicament. Whilst Aza cannot stop thinking about the bacterial companions with whom she so unwillingly shares her body, Mike is unnerved by the idea that the stomach might somehow exert authority over the brain. Liberal humanist conceptions of the bounded, independent self – of a body governed by the mind; sealed off from non-human influences; at once dominant and exceptional – are contaminated. They are replaced with something leaky, plural, open, vulnerable. By thinking too hard about/with their teeming and tyrannical stomachs, Aza and Mike confront what Elaine Graham has referred to as a “dissolution of the ontological hygiene” (11) by which Western culture has separated and protected the human for hundreds of years. I’m particularly interested in the idea of ‘hygiene’ here, because – in each novel – Aza and Mike’s anxiety manifests itself in the same way: through repetitive behaviours (around washing, cleanliness, sanitisation) that have been clinically diagnosed as symptoms of OCD, or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Aza obsessively cleans and re-cleans a cut on her finger; Mike frequently washes his face and hands until they are red-raw. Both have been suffering with this condition for years and have sought treatment: a combination of medication and intensive psychotherapy – with little success.

Whilst thinking about the theme of *IJYAL*’s launch issue and planning this article in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic (when the dissolution of ‘ontological hygiene’ has never felt more relevant or anxiety-inducing), my mind immediately turned to these two characters: being human is hard for Aza and Mike, but being posthuman is even harder. Why is this exactly? What happens when the posthuman first emerges – not as stylized cyborg to befriend, zombie to kill or other-worldly power to channel – but as ‘intrusive thought’ from gastric depths: a debilitating, embodied force that makes everyday life a huge challenge. And how – if at all – might this force be managed? Through an examination of adolescent anxiety in Green’s *Turtles All The Way Down* and Ness’s *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, I hope to draw initial connections between the posthuman, mental health, and young adult fiction in a way that makes a case for broader, more inclusive definitions of all three. Charting Donna Haraway’s theoretical shift from slick ‘cyborgs’ to messy ‘compost’ and tangled ‘string figures’, this article advocates an alternative understanding of the posthuman, opening up the critical conversation beyond conventional fantasy genres whilst simultaneously demonstrating how Green and Ness interrogate strict teleological storylines and ontological categories to offer a spectrum of different posthuman options.

YOUNG ADULT FICTION AND THE POSTHUMAN

For many, the origins of contemporary critical posthumanism lie in Donna Haraway's early 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", first published in *Socialist Review*. In this dense, theoretically diverse text, bringing together feminism, socialism and materialism, Haraway argues that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (7). She advocates for "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities" (14), debunking the humanist myths of uniqueness and individuation; of an exceptional, incorruptible self beyond the reach of non-human influence. Although this essay would go on to shape the course of posthuman scholarship for years to come, Haraway quickly expressed concern over the ways in which her ideas were being adopted and tied to a particularly sinister and radical vein of futurism. In a 2006 interview for *Theory, Culture and Society*, reflecting on the original publication of "A Cyborg Manifesto", Haraway discloses that she has long stopped using the term 'posthuman' as it is "all too easily appropriated by the blissed-out, 'Let's all be posthumanists and find our next teleological evolutionary stage in some kind of transhumanist technoenhancement'" ("When we have never been human" 140). In short, Haraway maintains that the figure of the posthuman is – in its critical treatment – as open to blinkered exceptionalism as that of the human.

This certainly seems to be the case when it comes to recent posthuman treatments of YA fiction. Robyn McCallum's argument that "children's and adolescent fiction is, on the whole, dominated by humanist conceptions of the individual, the self and the child" (257) – conservative tendencies that reinforce human exceptionalism; that promote development into stable adult selfhood – still holds true for many critics of children's literature, even (or especially) for those examining and endorsing its more subversive elements. For instance, Zoe Jaques – examining compound human/non-human entities in her work *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* – argues that fantasy fictions "possess a transformative power that might be said to transcend, or at the very least critique, the more dominant (and dominating) ideologies they overtly ascribe to, (or are culturally conditioned to fulfil), pointing to [...] a fiction 'replete with radical potential'" (5). Indeed, the phrase 'posthuman potential' or 'posthuman possibility' has become something of a rhetorical placemark in recent criticism: a way of nodding to the imminent radicalism of children's and adolescent fiction, whilst simultaneously acknowledging its existing limitations and conservatism. The potential risk of such criticism is to position these fictions within the same restrictive teleology they actively critique: just like its adolescent characters – trapped within a narrative that ultimately encourages development into adult selfhood – YA fiction has perhaps become trapped within a critical framework that ultimately endorses its maturation to the "next teleological evolutionary stage" via tropes of posthuman empowerment.

This might have something to do with the way in which certain YA genres – fantasy, dystopia, speculative, and/or science fiction – have attracted the majority of posthumanist readings to date, whilst other genres seem to have been largely excluded from the conversation. In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature*, Clare Bradford et al. identify three groups of YA texts that utilise “posthumanist ideas and motifs” (32): narratives about robotics and AI; narratives about cybernetics and biological engineering; and narratives about virtual reality (focussing their discussion exclusively on the first two of these groups). In the recent 2018 collection *Posthumanism in YA Fiction*, edited by Anita Tarr and Donna R. H White, all twelve chapters still only consider texts that fall into these three (rather limited) categories, whilst the relatively ‘everyday’ concerns of contemporary realist YA are excluded from the conversation. As a result of this imbalance, the posthuman has been elevated to the realm of the extraordinary: narratives of futurity, redemption, liberation, transcendent saving the world and ‘kicking butt’ kind of stuff. It has been heralded as both the adolescent’s antidote to humanist systems of entrapment, and young adult fiction’s antidote to its inherited/conditioned conservatism. Indeed, in the conclusion of *Posthumanist Readings in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction*, Jennifer Harrison goes so far as to suggest that exposure to posthumanism offers young people the “most viable option out of dissatisfaction and depression, and toward a viable future” (125) – a curative, medicinal solution to the current mental health crisis amongst young people that confirms just how radical/transformational young adult fiction can be.

And yet, as we have seen in *Turtles All The Way Down* and *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, exposure to the posthuman – via intrusive thoughts of and from a leaky, contaminated, bacteria-ridden blob of terran compost – can actually exacerbate rather than cure mental illness in its adolescent protagonists. Aza and Mike are not traversing dystopian landscapes or battling to save the world from destruction, aided by some latent posthuman power that fosters maturation and evolution. Instead, they are simply trying to get through the ordinariness of every day: eating lunch, chatting with friends, watching films, finishing assignments (whilst being thwarted by the posthuman prosaic at every turn). As Mike points out in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, it is only the so-called indie kids who seem empowered by the posthuman:

You’ve got them at your school too. That group with the cool-geek haircuts and the charity shop clothes and names from the fifties. Nice enough, never mean, but always the ones who end up being the Chosen One when the vampires are calling or when the alien queen needs the source of all light or something. They’re too cool to ever, ever do anything like go to prom or listen to music other than jazz while reading poetry. They’ve always got some story going on that they’re heroes of. The rest of us just have to live here, hovering around the edges, left out of it all, for the most part. (Ness 24)

Throughout the novel, via short italicised paragraphs at the opening of each chapter that form an independent, yet parallel narrative, Ness juxtaposes the extraordinary lives of these indie kids – battling blue-eyed zombie cops and deer, falling in and out of star-crossed love, dying beautifully from increasingly ridiculous causes – with the relatively routine concerns of Mike. He feels like he is living on the fringes of a high-stakes world built for, and peopled by, exceptional posthuman protagonists and antagonists. Even his friendship group, for all their outward disaffectedness, participate in this spectacular world: whilst his love-interest Henna had a brother, Teemu, who was an indie-kid (and who mysteriously disappeared fighting to save the world from vampires), his best friend Jared is perhaps the ultimate posterboy for posthuman power: a six-foot demi-God of cats – soon to be promoted to full God status – with the supernatural ability to heal minor physical afflictions.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza similarly wrestles with being underwritten in larger stories that others are telling. The community of bacteria inside her, as she so eloquently puts it, “challenge the whole notion of *me* as a singular pronoun, let alone as the author of my fate” (Green 5). This sense of contamination only intensifies when intimacy is thrown into the equation. After kissing Davis, the sensitive billionaire boy who lives down the creek, she is utterly disgusted by the implications of this messy act of microbial exchange:

Just how his tongue has its own particular microbiome and once he sticks his tongue in my mouth his bacteria become part of my microbiome for literally the rest of my life. Like, his tongue will sort of *always* be in my mouth until I’m dead, and then his tongue microbes will eat my corpse. (Green 164)

She is painfully aware of Davis’ kiss re-writing her intestinal flora. Aza’s best friend Daisy tries to appease these fears – “Maybe you’re going to get superpowers from his microbes. She was a normal girl until she kissed a billionaire and became...MICROBIANCA, Queen of the Microbes” (Green 172) – but Aza remains unconvinced by this alternative vision of posthuman power. Aza’s sense of exclusion from such narratives is not helped by the fact that Daisy – prolific writer of *Star Wars* fan fiction – has surreptitiously written Aza into her popular online series as Ayala: a rather useless companion who, riddled with nervous habits, does little other than sit on the side-lines whilst Chewbacca and Rey pursue spectacular space adventures and hot inter-species romance. Like Mike, Aza is excluded from the array of extraordinary posthuman narratives that surround her – faced, instead, with the disempowering posthuman banality of her tongue microbes.

In “Posthuman by Accident; Posthuman by Design: Power and Belonging in Posthuman Young Adult Fiction”, Maree Kimberley articulates the need for recognising young adult posthuman narratives “beyond dystopias and cyborgs”, thereby offering readers “a different perspective of living a posthuman life” (126). Although Kimberley focuses her analysis on two young adult novels (Kevin Brooks’ *iBoy* (2010) and Brian Caswell’s *A Cage of Butterflies*

(1992)) that do indeed offer contemporary realist settings – and thereby an alternative stage for posthuman activity – the protagonists themselves still possess extraordinary powers: whilst Tom in *iBoy* has, after incurring brain damage, the remarkable ability to tap into the information superhighway, the Babies in *A Cage of Butterflies* share peculiarly networked minds. Kimberley’s argument is that these elements “reposition the texts as speculative fiction set within contemporary realism and, in so doing, create a new thematic group of posthuman young adult novels” (126). And yet, this new group still seems to exclude ordinary, non-medically or technologically enhanced protagonists – the likes of Aza and Mike. It also appears that, despite advocating for a broader appreciation of the posthuman, Kimberley falls into the critical habit that Haraway so strongly censured: promoting the posthuman as the “next teleological evolutionary stage”. Kimberley argues that both *iBoy* and *A Cage of Butterflies*, in their speculative-contemporary realist blendings, “hold hope for the future, a future that is better for the characters’ ability to embrace their posthuman-ness” (127) and that young adult literature more broadly has “a particular role to play in enabling adolescents to navigate the change from human to posthuman” (139). It is a statement that feels as naively over-confident as Daisy’s “MICROBIANCA, Queen of the Microbes” declarative. For, as Mike points out in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, “even if there’s no one in my family or my circle of friends who’s going to be the Chosen One or the Beacon of Peace or whatever the hell it’s going to be next time around, I reckon there are a lot more people like me than there are indie kids with unusual names and capital-D Destinies” (Ness 35).

So, how do we avoid falling into the above trap? How can we expand our appreciation of the posthuman beyond exclusionary and exceptional categories (the kind of categories that otherwise leave Mike and Aza on the sidelines)? And if the posthuman is not the “next teleological evolutionary stage” – both within young adult narratives, and for the direction of young adult fiction in general – then what is it exactly? In the next section, using Donna Haraway’s most-recent theories of multicritter ‘compost’ and ‘string figures’ as an initial lens, I will examine the various ways in which both Ness and Green generate a-teleological storytelling structures within their novels in order to accommodate alternative representations and understandings of the posthuman.

SPIRALS AND LIGHT-TIME

Moving away from the figure of the slick cyborg, a figure that has embedded itself so deeply into our cultural consciousness, Haraway’s theoretical work has – since the 1980’s – become decidedly earthier and messier: repeatedly throwing detritus on the idea of the posthuman. Both *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2008) focus on our ‘companion species’ – those creatures (whether large or microscopic) with whom we share our world, bodies, and processes of becoming. In 2018, with the publication of *Staying with*

the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene, Haraway burrows her way even further into our messy fusions and entanglements stating, “I am a compost-ist, not a posthuman-ist: we are all compost, not posthuman” (161). The figure of compost – hot, teeming piles of multicritter intra-activity – eschews any form of futurism and exceptionalism. It is hard to overly valorise wormy soil; hard to herald decomposition processes as impending salvation. Working in tandem with compost, Haraway also invokes the theoretical trope of SF or “string figures” – the polysemous acronym simultaneously standing for “science fiction, speculative fabulation [...] speculative feminism, science fact” (2). These tentacular loops and whorls – like a complex game of cat’s cradle – represent the various patterns, knottings, and tanglings of our composting existence: the multiple and multiplying ways in which we connect to, and tell stories about/with, our companion species.

It seems somewhat fitting then, that both Aza and Mike refer to their posthuman anxiety and compulsive behaviours via the imagery of tightening, looping ‘spirals’. As Aza’s therapist points out:

You often try to understand your experience through metaphor, Aza. It’s like a demon inside of you; you’ll call your consciousness a bus, or a prison cell, or a spiral, or a whirlpool, or a loop, or a – I think you once called it a scribbled circle, which I found interesting. (Green 88)

Similarly, when describing his growing anxiety to best friend demi-God Jared, Mike explains:

I’ve been getting stuck in these kind of... *loops* lately and it’s getting harder and harder to get out of them... Even when I know it’s stupid. In fact, knowing it’s stupid, knowing I’ve already washed my hands a hundred goddamned times, actually makes it worse. (Ness 50)

Excluded from empowering narratives of posthuman possibility, but nevertheless faced with the overwhelming reality of their contaminated ‘compost’ existence, both Aza and Mike attempt to reinstate some form of ‘ontological hygiene’ through repeated acts of cleansing. Desperate to find – at the bottom of spiralling string figures; beneath the layers of fiction composed by bickering bacteria, glowing-eyed indie-kids, or horny jedi – what Aza refers to as a “way-down-deep” self (Green 165): something pure, unsullied, stable, uniquely theirs. However, all such attempts prove futile. In fact, their compulsive cleaning actually ends up further erasing any unique identifying markers: whilst Aza opens the cut on her finger so much (to cleanse it with antibacterial soap) that a permanent, pliable callus forms over her fingerprint, Mike washes his hands so vigorously that his fingertip pads crack and bleed. These compulsive actions make them – not unique and special – but extra ordinary (a fact that feels particularly pertinent right now in this mid-pandemic world of repetitive hand

washing). The coiling spirals tighten successively, trapping them in their own prosaic posthuman prisons. So terrifying is this experience that both protagonists, at their lowest points, consider whether it would be easier simply not to exist: “being afraid or being gone” (Ness 252) seem like the only viable options.

The advice from those around them, particularly their posthuman-friendly besties, is to simply accept, perhaps even enjoy/embrace the messiness of a composting, string figured existence. Davis – ever the thoughtful philosopher – points out to Aza that “spirals might grow infinitely smaller the further you follow them in, but they also grow infinitely larger the further you follow them out” (Green 284). But Daisy perhaps puts it best/most forcefully when, in response to Aza’s anxious prevaricating, she retells a story that her mum loves about an old woman and a scientist. The scientist has just finished his lecture on the history of the earth (its formation from clouds of cosmic dust), when an old woman stands up and rebuffs his claims, insisting that “the earth is a flat plane resting on the back of a turtle” (Green 245). Deciding to humour the old woman, the scientist asks, “if that’s so, what is the turtle standing on?” (245). And the woman says, “[i]t is standing on the shell of another giant turtle” (245). Frustrated, the scientist asks, “well what is that turtle standing on?” (245). And the old woman says, “Sir, you don’t understand, it’s turtles all the way down” (245). Daisy is insistent on this point: “it’s turtles all the way fucking down, Holmesy. You’re trying to find the turtle at the bottom of the pile, but that’s not how it works” (245).

Aza is, admittedly, quite taken with this idea. Indeed, there are aspects of unbounded posthuman existence (beyond microbial exchange and/or intergalactic space races) that she actually finds herself drawn to, comfortable with and – in some instances – even reassured by. For example, she still holds on to her Dad’s phone, eight years after he has died: finding something magical in the fact that this piece of technology effectively extends his consciousness beyond the arbitrary encasement of a human body. She keeps swiping through his stored collection of photos, as though communing with his nuanced consciousness outside the particularities of time and space. It is the same non-sensorial space that she seeks through her burgeoning relationship with Davis. Grossed out by kissing and intimidated by the physicality of hanging out ‘IRL’, Aza prefers texting, facetimeing, and communicating via Davis’s blog. This transports her to some boundless place with “no ceilings and no walls and no floor”, offering a “closeness that real life with its real bodies could never match” (Green 192). In this amorphous arena, Aza does not mind so much that she might be a fiction written by others. In fact, she actively encourages Davis to narrate her body via instant messaging (and he gladly takes up the challenge, combining his usual hyperbolic, literary commentary with the more low-brow “I want to start a fan blog about your ass [...] I want to write fan fiction in which your amazing butt falls in love with your beautiful eyes” (170-71)). Needless to say, Aza’s concern for ‘ontological hygiene’ temporarily disappears.

Alternative methods of storytelling – particularly SF/science fiction narratives that disrupt rigid teleological and spatial boundaries – feature as something of a motif in *Turtles all the Way Down*. Aza’s best friend Daisy is, as we know, a prolific writer of *Star Wars* fan fiction. She frequently vents her frustrations over the small-mindedness of online trolls, who attack her for depicting controversial interspecies romance, but also over Aza’s apparent indifference to the many intricacies of the *Star Wars* universe:

“You know, it’s a little annoying that you don’t read *my* fanfic, but what’s really annoying is that you don’t read *any* Chewie fanfic. If you did, you’d know that Wookiee was not a language, it was a species. There were at least three Wookie languages. Rey learned Shryiiwook from Wookies who came to Jakku, but she didn’t usually speak it because Wookiees mostly understand Basic.”

I was laughing. “And why are you using the past tense?”

“Because all of this happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, Holmesy. You always use the past tense when talking about *Star Wars*. Duh.” (Green 67)

The past does, rather unusually, continue to dominate conversations about space (so often associated with futurity and advancement) throughout the novel. Obsessed with astronomy, Davis explains the concept of ‘light-time’ to Aza during one of their star-gazing dates: “it means if we were travelling at the speed of light, it would take us forty-five minutes to get from Earth to Jupiter, so the Jupiter we’re seeing right now is actually Jupiter forty-five minutes ago” (Green 103). Aza is completely fascinated by this: the notion that – when looking up at the stars, planets and galaxies – you are actually “looking at the past” (103). It offers a number of tantalising possibilities for Aza and Davis, who are both still grieving the loss of a parent. If you pick a galaxy or solar system far enough away, the inhabitants there would be receiving ‘old light’ from Earth – seeing a past iteration of our world, one that pre-dates familial tragedy. Someone in Tau Ceti’s solar system, for example, would be seeing a twelve-year-old version of Earth, in which Aza’s Dad is still shuffling around the kitchen making a cup of tea. It is a comforting thought and so both Aza and Davis continue to indulge in their star-gazing escapades, “seeking solace in the old light” together (Green 206).

The concept of ‘light-time’ also alleviates some (if not all) of Aza’s anxieties about spirals. Our galaxy, as Davis points out, is just a “big spiral” in a revolving constellation of other big spirals (Green 202). Each spiral exists then, not as a limiting and tightening prison, but as a tangle of different possible temporalities: at once, past, present, and future (depending on the relative configurations of light-time). It is a complex simultaneity that Green actively attempts to re-create through his storytelling. Like *Star Wars*, *Turtles All The Way Down* is predominantly narrated in the past tense, from the first person perspective of

Aza right up until the final star-gazing scene between her and Davis. However, in the closing few paragraphs, this narration shifts strikingly to the present tense: an adult Aza considering and reflecting on her life since. There is no sense, however, of teleological progression or of a maturation timeline from anxious, lovelorn teen to well-adjusted, empowered adult. On the contrary, ‘adult’ Aza describes the looping and re-looping of her life back on itself: “I know the secret that the me lying beneath that sky could not imagine: I know that girl would go on, that she would grow up, have children and love them, that despite loving them she would get too sick to care for them, be hospitalized, get better, and then get sick again” (Green 284-5). The teenage girl lying under the stars might seem to exist ‘a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away’, but this is – according to the physics of light-time – all relative.

Megan L. Musgraves, discussing the history of YA illness and disability narratives, observes that the language of ‘overcoming’ is still so pervasive in these texts, and asks what it might look like “when some authors attempt to write new kinds of narratives that dismiss, or sometimes outright criticize, the language of overcoming as an insult to ill and disabled individuals” (8). In *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, Mike is extremely critical of any timelines/forms of storytelling that suggest the teleological progression of ‘overcoming’ – particularly those that foreground maturation into adulthood: “The mistake of every adult, though, is to think darkness and hardship aren’t important to young people because we’ll grow out of it. Who cares if we will? Life is happening to us now, just like it is happening to you” (Ness 173). And perhaps even more damningly: “What happens to you when you get older? Do you just forget everything from before you turned eighteen? Do you make yourself forget? Honestly. Adults. How do they live in the world? (Or maybe that *is* how they live in the world)” (Ness 39). Mike refuses to believe that either waiting for maturation into adulthood, or evolution into a super charged demi-god, is the right way to cope with life’s difficulties. As narrator of the novel, he gets self-conscious and frustrated when he has to stop and explain his family’s history of obsessive behaviour: his mother’s blinkered political ambitions, his father’s drinking, his big sister’s life-threatening eating disorder, his little sister’s fanaticism and his own saga of anxious compulsions. And he is equally frustrated by the storytelling pressure to suggest that things “are better now” (especially when he knows his own mental health is rapidly deteriorating again): “But this, all this, isn’t the story I’m trying to tell [...] this is the part of your life where it gets taken over by other people’s stories and there’s nothing you can do about it except hold on tight and hope that you’re still alive at the end to take up your own story again” (Ness 58-9). Like Haraway, Mike instinctively understands storytelling as a messy knot, a complex cat’s cradle of string figures, that – through its very weaving and entanglements with other stories – defies any clear sense of the past, present, and future.

Like Green, Ness also seems committed to participating in this alternative mode of storytelling. As previously mentioned, the italicised paragraphs that open each new chapter of *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, tell the parallel, extraordinary story of the local ‘indie-kids’. In

earlier years, these supercharged kids have fought the undead, battled soul-eating ghosts, and engaged in a tragic vampire cycle of romance and death. The current iteration of high-stakes indie-kid adventures revolve around clashes with a foe called 'The Immortals', who seem to be creating dangerous fissures between worlds. Although much of this activity takes place beyond Mike's normal routine of school, work and home, the two narratives crossover at a number of key points: a deer (startled by Immortal activity) crashes into Henna's car whilst she and Mike are driving, a horde of zombie cops interrupt Mike and Henna kissing, and a bomb goes off whilst Mike and his sisters attend a pop concert. The two narrative threads knot together repeatedly, bringing the mundane into frequent (often explosive) contact with the supernatural and spectacular/speculative. Kimberley might refer to this as a prime example of her aforementioned hybrid genre: "repositioning speculative fiction within contemporary realism" (126), thereby creating a new form of posthuman novel that – by portraying a future that is better for characters to "embrace their post-humaness" (127) – can also help adolescent readers navigate the change from human to posthuman. But Ness provides no such comfort, to either his characters or his readers.

On the contrary, in the final chapters of the novel – those climactic graduation scenes – the two narrative threads become tangled in a way that complicates and ultimately prevents such an empowering transition. As they make their way to graduation, Jared and Mike come across a badly wounded, dying indie-kid (one of the many dashing and enigmatic 'Finns'). With a regretful but determined look, Jared puts his hands on Finn and light pours from him like never before. Miraculously, Finn takes a deep, choking breath and wakes up: his life-threatening wounds having completely disappeared. After expressing his gratitude, Finn rushes off back towards the high school, realising that he can now launch one final attack against the 'Immortals' and save his paramour/fellow indie-kid Satchel. Mike, meanwhile, is completely shocked by his best friend's new powerful healing abilities. Jared explains that he has – with certain conditions – finally accepted the call to ascend to a full-time, all-powerful God. It is something he has accepted reluctantly: he still wishes he could avoid his indie-kid destiny altogether and just live a 'normal life', but there are undeniable perks to his new God status. And one of those perks – he explains excitedly, after they walk across the podium and receive their high school diplomas – is the newfound ability to completely heal mental health issues. Not only could Jared now heal Mike of his OCD, but he could also completely cure Mike's sister of her eating disorder.

This is it. The perfectly set-up moment of teleological evolution: as the characters formally transition out of their high school adolescence, they are also presented with the opportunity to evolve out of their problems via the curative powers of the posthuman. As though to further mark this momentous occasion, indie-kids Finn and Satchel emerge from the gymnasium – screaming for everyone to run – as the high school explodes into firework and flames behind them: a spectacular backdrop for a spectacular rite-of-passage. And yet, this rite is interrupted. Mike thanks Jared for the offer to heal his OCD, but quietly declines:

“I think...I think I don’t want you to heal my scar. Or anything else yet.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, if it gets bad again. Bad enough to... Well, I’ll think about it then. But not yet.”

“Is the medication working that well?”

“No, but if you heal all that stuff, I’ll live the rest of my life not knowing if I could have figured it out on my own.” (Ness 340)

This is not, then, a final, triumphant moment of posthuman empowerment. Instead, Mike and his friends – making room for the indie-kids (who seem thoroughly exhausted and fed-up by their adventures) – simply sit and watch the school burn. Dismissing the obvious metaphor of their “childhoods burning down” (Ness 342), Mike is struck by the beauty of the flames and comments: “Everything’s always ending. But everything’s always beginning, too” (Ness 342). The two narratives twist together to form another complex string figure that defies temporal logic and progression. Indeed, Mike reflects on the fact that the moment is “almost a kind of loop for me, something to feel on the inside of, but this time it’s good” (Ness 343). Inside of this SF loop, sitting with a medley of companion species – human, posthuman, and everything in-between – a curious kind of “forever” (Ness 343) emerges for our not-quite-cured narrator, as the compost-pile backdrop continues to burn hotter and brighter.

Through looping, coiling narratives and ‘light-time’ experiments, Ness and Green ensure that their adolescent protagonists remain ambiguously unevolved. Teleological patterns have been disrupted; ‘overcoming’ arcs suspended. Instead, we leave Mike and Aza much as we found them: struggling to negotiate the posthuman entanglements in which they are caught.

MR MESSY AND GRAFFITI

I could easily end the article here – with the closure of each novel: neat, fitting, conclusive. But in the spirit of string figures, I first want to loop back on myself slightly and consider what the implications of all this is for both the representation and understanding of mental health in young adult fiction. If posthuman narratives cannot offer medicinal, curative properties, then what – if anything – can they offer their adolescent readership? It is, after all, a readership that appears increasingly vulnerable to mental health issues: or, as Aza so cuttingly puts it, “adolescent sanity is so twentieth century” (Green 87).

For Musgraves, recent posthuman narratives in YA fiction – specifically those that offer realist representations of adolescent engagement with technology – inspire a form of “imaginary activism” in their young readers, prompting them to “contemplate their real world choices and take action as digital citizens” (xi). The reader is positioned “first to imagine, then to discuss and finally to act upon real-world concerns and promote real-world social change” (xi-xii). Orienting much of her thesis around Haraway’s figure of the cyborg, Musgraves examines texts that depict the integration of the human with non-human technologies – with a chapter dedicated to texts that consider technological enhancements to the ill and/or disabled body (such as prosthetic limbs, oxygen tanks, wheelchairs, hearing aids etc). Although Musgraves makes a convincing argument for how these realist texts offer alternatives to the ableist ‘overcoming’ narrative by encouraging an active acceptance of posthuman alterations to the ill or disabled body, little consideration is given to the ill or disabled mind. For adolescent readers struggling with mental health issues, the pathway to activism outlined above – imagine, contemplate, discuss, and act – is one fraught with potential difficulties. Furthermore, the very process of accepting the posthuman condition is, as we have seen with Aza and Mike, itself a traumatic and often seemingly impossible task. Is the narrative of ‘acceptance’, outlined by Musgraves, as damaging as the narrative of ‘overcoming’ that she so rightly and persuasively critiques?

Once again, Haraway’s figure of the cyborg seems to inspire over-confidence in the capacities and consequences of the posthuman, prioritising the techno-enhanced body over the vulnerabilities of the mind. Jamie McPhie, in *Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Anthropocene: A Posthuman Enquiry*, chooses to think with and through Haraway’s later theories of ‘compost’ and ‘string figures’ to reevaluate our understanding of mental health. He argues that humanism – by conceptually fracturing “the mind from the body and the body from the environment” (58); sealing off the human from any potential outside contaminants – led to the belief that “mental health is somehow trapped within a human brain rather than distributed of a world much more than human” (58). This, in turn, generated the fallacy of “Mr. Happy” (58): a bounded, independent self who, engaging in certain practices – positivity, physical activity, connection with others etc – can easily achieve a state of mental wellbeing (thereby further compounding their self-actualisation). Under this paradigm, mental health conditions such as OCD are seen as diseases bounded within the self and are treated as such: through targeted, highly individualised therapeutic practices. Both Aza and Mike receive one-to-one counselling for their conditions, and are prescribed drugs based on their specific, individual needs. Unfortunately, neither finds these approaches particularly helpful. And, as we have already seen, the fallacy of ‘Mr. Happy’ actually exacerbates their conditions, as they obsessively attempt to cleanse and strip themselves down to a pure, stable self.

McPhie offers an alternative approach to mental health, shifting our ontological focus from the highly controlled and bordered ‘Mr Happy’ to the endless entanglements of ‘Mr

Messy.’ Roger Hargreaves’ beloved children’s character Mr. Messy is, as Mcphie points out in “Mr. Messy and the Ghost in the Machine”, so messy that he resembles “a knot”, a “bundle of pink lines that (has) no beginning and no end” (61). Like Haraway’s cat’s cradle string figures, Mr Messy is a looping assemblage that defies borders and definition. His environment gets tangled up in him, and he gets tangled up in his environment. This, Mcphie argues, is how we should view mental health: not as something neatly restricted to the human brain, but as something that is messily “distributed in environments” (86). Such a radical reappraisal asks that conditions such as OCD are “treated as contextualised environmental phenomena as opposed to a disease bounded within the self” (*Mental Health and Wellbeing* 72). It is beyond the scope of this article to consider what these alternative treatments and therapies might, in practice, look like (indeed, Mcphie is not entirely clear on this himself and verges dangerously on anti-therapy rhetoric at times), but I do want to consider the effects of shifting the ontological focus from ‘Mr. Happy’ to ‘Mr. Messy’. Does an understanding that we – and our mental health – are ‘distributed in environments’ provide any form of relief in and of itself?

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza once again seeks solace in Davis’ understanding and appreciation of the skies above. In his online blog, full of literary quotations and pseudo-philosophical musings, he writes: “I kept thinking about how sky is a singular noun, as if it’s one thing. But the sky isn’t one thing. The sky is everything” (Green 57). Later on, he adds: “from where the stars are watching, there is almost no difference between varieties of alive, between me and the newly mown grass I’m lying on right now” (Green 185). Putting aside the highly pertinent questions of whether Davis’ hyper-articulate new materialism feels authentic (how many teenagers are capable of articulating such pithy truisms?) and how problematic it is for a wealthy, white male to be consistently propping up a young girl’s knowledge base and self-understanding, these reflective passages nevertheless provide Aza with the language for something she could not describe before. Being in and of environments is both Aza’s biggest fear and her most significant source of comfort. When she experiences one of her anxious thought ‘spirals’, she is both “*in the spiral and of it*” (Green 150); both trapped by it and part of it. And yet, this is also how she feels when she first comes across the Raymond Pettibon painting in Davis’ mansion:

It was a colourful spiral, or maybe a multicoloured rose, or a whirlpool. By some trick of the curved lines, my eyes got lost in the painting so that I kept having to focus on tiny individual pieces of it. It didn’t feel like something I was looking at so much as something I was part of. I felt, and then dismissed, an urge to grab the painting off the wall and run away with it. (Green 100)

This painting continues to inspire and reassure Aza throughout the novel and beyond, with ‘adult’ Aza describing how Davis finally gifted it to her, and how it has followed her from

home to home ever since. So, what is the difference? Why is Pettibon's colourful spiral so desired, when the anxious thought spirals are so despised?

The answer, Mcphie might argue, lies in the delicate balance between the conditions 'in' and 'of'. If Mr Messy only ever felt 'in' his entangled environment, his existence would ultimately prove to be as restricted and confined as that of Mr. Happy. However, to also feel part 'of' an entangled environment is to actively contribute to its looping, its string-figures, its ongoing storytelling. In this scenario, Mr Messy could "change his narrative to become whoever he wanted to become. In fact, he chose no longer to be pink, he chose to be all in... gold" (Mcphie "Mr Messy" 85). This is how the messy, colourful Pettibon spiral makes Aza feel: like she is more 'of' it than 'in' it, like she can still change her narrative. At certain points throughout the novel, Aza is indeed empowered by this feeling. Travelling to the final art show with her friends, a radiant Aza belts out the lyrics to a pop song and makes a striking realisation: "You're everything, everything, everything,' and I felt like I was. You're both the fire and the water that extinguishes it. You're the narrator, the protagonist and the sidekick. You're the storyteller and the story told. You are somebody's something, but you are also your you" (Green 257). But it is a tricky balance to maintain, and such a euphoric sense of agency – such a jubilant 'acceptance' of posthuman plurality – is inevitably temporary.

Mike's mental health is equally shaped by the various ways he is trapped 'in' – and yet also struggles to be part 'of' – his entangled environments. It is senior tradition at his high school to tag the nearby railway bridge: a final act of adolescent rebellion against the strictures of rule and law, and a way of leaving traces of themselves behind after graduation. As Mcphie points out, graffiti – as an inscription on the skin of the world – acts as another messy "extension" of our cerebral and bodily epidermis into our environments (*Mental Health and Wellbeing* 142). Although Mike's friends are game and arm themselves with spraypaint, Mike is resistant and offers only anxious, sceptical commentary throughout. He is particularly disconcerted by the fact that they forgot to bring white spraypaint, to erase the existing tags before beginning their own (anxiously seeking the kind of corrective dermabrasion that he has already performed on his own fingertips through his cleansing compulsions). The majority of his friends, however, are unfussed: they spray their tags over and around the existing graffiti, creating a colourful, entangled mass of lines and shapes. Henna is about to add her contribution to this glorious posthuman palimpsest, this celebration of adolescent empowerment, when she comes across the painted memorial names of the indie-kids who died in the latest round of apocalyptic carnage.

This stops Henna short. She is wary of further evangelising the kind of narratives that stole her brother – a former indie-kid – from her all those years ago. Instead, she asks Mike (still surly and reluctant from the graffiti fiasco) to accompany her to the tattoo parlour. Here, on the side of her stomach – which fizzles with as much anxiety as Mike's does – she gets a tiny tattoo of her late brother's name: Teemu. Mike is both impressed and moved by it. Without contributing to some glorifying statement of empowerment or acceptance, in fact

actively standing apart from and critiquing such statements, Henna's string-figure tattoo acts as a small mark of posthuman's productivity – even whilst still highlighting its debilitating, stomach-churning (Teemu/Teeming) effects. Mike and Aza might not always be capable of such acts of reclamation – as we have seen, neither novel offers them a cure, permanent release from their anxiety, or full acceptance of their posthuman condition – but that does not matter. Because being posthuman means being worried sometimes. Or disempowered. Or ordinary. Or suddenly euphorically assertive. Microbianca Queen of the Microbes, Aayala the fumbling *Star Wars* sidekick, and Aza the girl afraid of her own bowels, are all part of the same messy, radically inclusive posthuman whorl. And as such, all deserve our critical attention and understanding. This, more than anything, is the one comfort that an anxious adolescent readership might draw from Ness's and Green's novels. And if this comfort sets them forward on Musgrave's path of 'imaginary activism' then wonderful. But if they still find themselves stuck in a spiral, unable to reconcile their own mind let alone bring about 'real world social change', that makes them and their reading experience no less valuable.

CODA COIL

As a disgruntled Mike points out: "Not everyone *has* to be the Chosen One. Not everyone has to be the guy who saves the world" (Ness 236). To this I would add: "Not every YA novel has to be the chosen one. Not every YA novel has to be the text that inspires teens to save the world." Narratives of posthuman empowerment – featuring light-sabre wielding wookies, or zombie-fighting cool kids – exclude the majority of ordinary teenagers who are, quite often, just trying to get through the day. And yet, these are the narratives that seem to dominate posthumanist readings of young adult fiction at the moment. By examining the anxieties of two characters who find the posthuman condition so debilitating, I hope this article might have a) started a conversation about the potentially damaging effects of exceptionalising the posthuman, b) shone a little light on the range of posthuman experience – available to both young adults and young adult fiction – beyond earth-shattering empowerment, and c) offered an alternative perspective on the impact that YA fiction can have on the representations and understandings of adolescent mental health. Just as Aza frantically, compulsively tries to find the "way-down-deep" (Green 165) self at the bottom of the tightening spiral, it sometimes feels like young adult critics use posthumanism to follow the spiral outward and secure the 'way-up-high' alternative – an extraordinary, open, positive force for right and redemption; a force that will enable young adult fiction, its readers, and its protagonists to finally overcome their humanist conditions/conditioning and, in so doing, better the world. But at the end of the day, this force is just as much a fiction as anything else. Trying to follow the spiral outward and upward is futile. Because, quite frankly (though this may just be Mr. Messy talking), it's turtles all the way fucking up too.

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